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ABSTRACT

This document, which was developed to assist individuals working in publicly sponsored literacy programs in Georgia, offers instructional plans and practical strategies designed to help teachers help students of adult literacy, adult basic education, General Educational Development, and English as a second language understand complex social problems. Detailed guidelines are provided for conducting three group learning activities devoted to the following topics: critical evaluation of economic and social information about living standards throughout the world; the economic and social costs of industrialization; and the importance of taking a stand on controversial social issues. Each activity contains the following: overview and rationale; skills developed in the activity; steps in preparing for the activity; materials needed; detailed explanation of the steps entailed in conducting the activity; and discussion questions. Also included are student handouts for each activity and print and Internet sources of further information. (MN)

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# Helping Your Students to Understand Complex Social Problems

Beyond Basic Skills
vol. 2, no. 2

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# Beyond Basic Skills

Innovative Teaching Materials for Georgia's Teachers of Adults

Volume 2, Number 2 Spring 1998


***Beyond Basic Skills*** offers instructional plans and practical strategies designed for immediate use by teachers in Georgia's adult literacy, ABE, GED, and ESL programs. This issue focuses on **Examining Complex Social Issues**. We hope you'll find these activities useful.

Tom Valentine
Jenny Sandlin

## Helping Your Students to Understand Complex Social Problems

Adult learners from around the United States were interviewed in 1993 as part of the National Institute for Literacy's collaborative curriculum project *Equipped for the Future*. They were asked what, to them, it meant to be literate. Their responses pointed to four major purposes for literacy:

- to gain access to information so they can position themselves in the world;
- to give voice to ideas, so that they can be heard and have an impact on the world around them;
- to make decisions and act independently; and
- to learn how to learn in order to keep up with the changing world.

Adult educators are in a wonderful position to help learners realize these goals, but many of our instructional practices hinder rather than help. In our desire to give our students "tasks that they can handle," most classes deal only with highly simplified reading materials. The materials we use for instruction have large print, wonderful consistency, and extremely clear messages. The real world of information, however, is full of small print, inconsistent statistics, and ambiguous—even manipulative—messages.

As you look over the handouts included with this issue, your first reaction might be, "Are you nuts? My students can't deal with this kind of stuff!" What we need to remember is that your students are entitled to a voice in the critical debates of the day, and democracy works best when citizens are well-informed. If you only teach your students to handle nicely structured information, you're probably not empowering them as much as you could.

This issue contains three activities designed to help students make sense of complex information about some very complex social issues. The first two will heighten their global awareness by presenting them with information comparing the USA to other countries. The third activity challenges your students to take a stand on three controversial social problems that confront us today.

We hope you'll decide to try some or all of these activities in your classroom soon. If you do, you'll be going a long way toward helping your students "learn how to learn"—a skill they will thank you for in the years to come.

### Planning the Sessions

The activities in this issue are designed for group instruction. You might try teaching all three activities as part of a special workshop. Alternatively, the activities can stand alone and be integrated into regular classroom instruction. The time required for the activities will vary depending on your teaching style and the size of your group.

### Something to Think About

Over the past two years, we've talked to hundreds of teachers and they don't always tell us the same things. One of the biggest areas of disagreement relates to how much we should ask students to do outside of the classroom. Some teachers believe that adult education should avoid "homework" and projects that require students to do anything outside the classroom. Other teachers see learning outside of the classroom as an integral part of any meaningful educational experience.

We're not sure when the idea came into being that it was okay to limit learning to the classroom, but perhaps it's time to rethink this idea. A recent federal study reports that a typical student attends our programs for fewer than 50 hours in total. Think of it: Fewer than 50 instructional hours to make up for years of missed school and to help students achieve their goals. Consequently, in planning instruction, adult educators have to make every minute count.

We believe that learning outside of the classroom is an essential factor in the academic and social development of adult students. Your students are looking for meaningful learning experiences—experiences that will help them to fulfill their roles as citizens, workers, and household decision-makers. In most issues of *Beyond Basic Skills*, the third—and most challenging—activity often calls for library or community research and almost always involves independent work on the part of the students. We know that some teachers are not used to this idea, but even if these activities don't fit your normal teaching style, we hope you'll give them a try.

## Activity #1: Understanding the World Around Us

*Overview and Rationale*

Many Americans lack awareness of the larger world in which we live. Because the United States is such a large country and a global "superpower," the average citizen has only limited knowledge of other countries. This is even more true of our students, many of whom missed out on high school social studies and whose finances do not allow extensive travel. Global awareness is important because it can help people to gain a sense of life in other countries and cultures and how different countries in the world are interconnected. For instance, when we begin to learn about different countries, we begin to see how events in the United States affect people in other countries.

This activity provides learners with the chance to increase their global awareness. Learners will critically evaluate information about living standards around the world. People around the world live in widely varying conditions. Two basic types of information are provided about living standards: "traditionally" used economic indicators of "well-being" such as per-capita income, and also more social information such as who has access to safe water. Governmental agencies traditionally used only economic indicators to compare living standards around the world, but more recently there has been a push towards using more "real-world" social indicators to measure a country's progress or standard of living.

During this activity, learners will be introduced to these demographic concepts and will engage in discussion about what they mean, about differences in quality of life around the globe, and about fairness and responsibility.

*Skills Developed in this Activity*

Reading and interpreting complex data, critical thinking, and critical discussion skills.

*Materials Needed for this Activity*

✓ A copy of the handout entitled "Activity #1: Comparing Living Standards Around the World," for each learner (see p. 5).

✓ Activity #1 Discussion Questions for you (see box on this page).

*How to Prepare for this Activity*

✓ Review the handout and try to predict your learners' ability to read it. Be sure to look at each of the variables and make sure you understand them well enough to explain to learners what they mean.

✓ If you believe that you need to preteach selected vocabulary, identify those words and decide the best way to define them for your learners.

✓ Review the discussion questions and adapt them—or write new ones—based on your own worldview and what you know about your learners.

*What to Do in the Session*

1. Before distributing the handout, begin with a brief interactive discussion about quality of life and living standards. Ask learners "What does it mean to have a good quality of life?" and "What kinds of things contribute to a good quality of life?" Explore and discuss learners' ideas about the topic, and write them on the board.
2. Explain that in today's session the class will look at quality of life around the world by looking at certain factors that are used by some people to measure quality of life.
3. Distribute the handout. Ask learners if they have encountered charts like this before, and ask for volunteers to explain how to read the chart. Use questions to help the group decipher the chart. Ask questions like, "What is the population of the United States?" and "What country has the longest life expectancy?" to determine how much or little help you need to give learners in reading a graph.
4. Ask what information is provided in this chart to measure quality of life. Compare this information to the ideas that learners came up with earlier and discuss which factors seem the most important.
5. Next, ask learners what information in the chart they think is most interesting. Have everyone create a sentence using the information in each column. Start with the first column, "*Population*," and continue with each column. For example, for the last column, "*Access to safe water*," someone might come up with "100% of the population in Switzerland has access to safe water." Have individual learners share their sentences for each column and write them on the board. If you have low-level learners, have other learners write the sentences on the board or write them yourself. Discuss the sentences for each column as you go along, asking the Discussion Questions found in the box on this page (for this part use the questions under the section "For Each Column"). For instance, discuss the sentences for the column "*Population*" before going to the next column "*People per square mile*."
6. Finally, engage in a general discussion using the Discussion Questions under the section "General Discussion" in the box below. In this discussion, encourage learners to draw upon the information they have just gleaned from the chart.

### Activity #1 Discussion Questions

**For Each Column**

1. Why did you choose to write about this information?
2. Do these facts surprise you?
3. Why do you think these situations exist? How do they happen?
4. Which country is the worst on this factor? The best?
5. How does the United States compare with the other countries on this factor?

**General Discussion**

1. Do you think the differences between countries are fair?
2. Which factor do you think is the most important for quality of life?
3. Are there other important factors that measure quality of life that are not listed here?
4. Which country would you most like to live in? Why?

**A Big Question**

5. Should the U.S. feel responsible for other countries that have a lower quality of life than ours? Every year, the United States and other industrialized countries give a percentage of their money (called the Gross National Product or GNP) to aid other countries. Most donor countries in the United Nations agreed to donate .7% of their GNPs to developing countries, but the U.S. donates only .2%. Do you think it is the responsibility of more industrialized nations to give money to developing nations? Why or why not?

## Activity #2: Who Uses What: The Price of Industrialization

*Overview and Rationale*

Nothing comes without a price. When you compare our standard of living to other countries using the factors in Activity #1, we seem to do pretty well. But as a result of our expanded industrialization and commercial production, the U.S. is one of the largest consumers of energy in the world, and subsequently our country creates national and global environmental problems.

Our standard of living is affected by the wealth the nation produces. That wealth is, at least in part, tied to industrialization, which goes hand in hand with energy consumption for the ever-increasing production of goods. Moreover, when we make money, we often spend it on energy consuming machines—cars, air conditioners, appliances, etc.

The first part of this activity will allow learners in your classroom to compare energy use between countries and continents around the world. In the second part, they will explore some of the negative consequences of energy consumption.

*Skills Developed in this Activity*

Reading and interpreting a graph, dealing with scientific terms, critical thinking, and critical discussion skills.

*Materials Needed for this Activity*

✓ A copy of the handout entitled, "Activity #2: Who Uses What?: The Price of Industrialization"(see p. 6).

✓ Activity #2 Discussion Questions, including questions for Part One, Part Two, and General Discussion (see box on this page).

*How to Prepare for this Activity*

✓ Read the passages contained on the handout and try to predict your learners' ability to read them.

✓ If you believe that you need to pre-teach selected vocabulary, identify those words and decide the best way to define them for your learners. Do this only for Part One, because for Part Two this will be part of the lesson.

✓ Review the discussion questions and adapt them—or write new ones—based on your own worldview and what you know about your learners.

*What to Do in the Session*

**Part One**

1. Have your students read the passage in Part One, either aloud or silently.
2. Ask them to study the graph. Ask for one or more volunteers to explain how to read a graph. Help out as needed.
3. Work with your students to extract facts from the graph, in the form of simple sentences. (For example: "The U.S. and Canada have about five percent of the world's population" and "Europe uses about 20% of the world's energy.") Write the sentences on the board as your students find them and challenge them to find as many as they can.
4. Once the facts are assembled, engage in a discussion of these facts using the discussion questions for Part One located in the box on this page.

**Part Two**

1. Have students read through this section, either aloud or silently. Warn them that there are lots of difficult scientific words, but that you'll explain them after they read them. While they read, they should guess at the meaning of words they are unsure of.
2. Have students identify troublesome words, and have them write them on the board. Explain that sometimes there is no simple way of saying something, and all readers have to guess at the meanings of some words. Perhaps you yourself don't have a precise understanding of some of the terms here; we would certainly be hard-pressed to offer anything but the simplest of definitions for most of these terms. Use this opportunity to explain how readers don't always need precise information.
3. If you think it would be useful, teach students how they can go about finding out meanings of unfamiliar words. If you have dictionaries, encyclopedias, or the internet in your classroom, challenge students to look up such terms as pesticides, greenhouse gases, and ozone.
4. Discuss each of the listed consequences one by one using the discussion questions below for each statement.
5. Launch into a general discussion of "what all this means." Some possible questions are listed in the "General Discussion" section of the box on this page.

*Optional Instructional Ideas*

This activity could lead to lots of other activities. Be creative. Stage a debate on the topic: "Resolved: The U.S. is an energy hog." Have students do more research on any one of the topics. Have students list all the things they use energy for, and challenge them to think of ways to reduce their use.

**Activity #2 Discussion Questions**

**Part One**

1. Look over the facts. Does this seem fair to you? Why or why not?
2. What do people and businesses in the United States use all of this energy for?
3. Why is energy consumption lower in Africa and India?
4. Where does energy come from?
5. Will the supply ever run out? Isn't there enough energy to go around?

**Part Two**

1. Can anyone explain the problem described here in your own words?
2. Is this a big problem?
3. How does it affect you and your quality of life?

**General Discussion**

1. What do you think other countries think of the United States? How would you feel if you lived in a country that allowed the United States to dump hazardous waste there. Why would any country allow that?
2. Do you think that Americans should use less energy? Why or why not?
3. If the government said we had to use less energy, how would it affect American companies? How would it affect your life? What would you be willing to give up?

## Activity #3: Taking a Stand on Controversial Social Issues

***Overview and Rationale***

Many of the more heated controversies that exist are extremely difficult to untangle without access to relevant information. Often, better debates are full of information gleaned from a variety of sources. Less fruitful debates are sometimes characterized by the inability to support a position with evidence and an unwillingness to hear other points of view.

In this activity, your students will learn what a controversy is and how to do research on controversies. In addition, they will get the chance to do their own research on three controversies that confront us today.

***Skills Developed in this Activity***

Critical reading, research, problem-solving, critical thinking and discussion skills.

***Materials Needed for this Activity***

✓ Copy of the handout entitled "Taking a Stand on Controversial Issues" (see p. 7).
✓ Discussion Questions (see p. 8).
✓ Copies of the three "controversy cards" printed on the lower half of this page (you'll need to reproduce them and cut them out).
✓ Access to relevant information resources.

***How to Prepare for this Activity***

✓ Review the handout and the controversy cards; pre-teach vocabulary if necessary.
✓ Review the discussion questions and adapt them as necessary.
✓ Find a way for your learners to access information about the controversies you are going to explore. A visit to the library (either as a group or as individuals) is probably the best solution. Most Georgia libraries have access to the World Wide Web, and virtually all of them have the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* and other newspaper and magazine indices. If your classroom has access to the Web, try using it for this activity; the Web is full of sites dealing with these controversies from almost every conceivable perspective.

If it's impossible for you to do either of these things, then perhaps you can find the time to visit the library yourself and prepare folders on each of the controversies. By photocopying newspaper and magazine articles and printing off some Web pages, you should be able to conduct the activity totally within your classroom.

***What to Do in the Sessions***

1. Begin with a general discussion about what a controversy is. Ask learners if they can give examples of controversies they have discussed with other people.
2. Distribute the handout. Have someone read the passage in Part One ("What is a Controversy?") out loud while everyone else follows along. Discuss the passage using the questions found in the box on page 8.
3. Next say that we're going to learn how to do research on controversies. Ask for volunteers to read Part Two ("Learning about Controversies through Research") on the handout. Discuss the passage using the questions on page 8.
4. Now hand out the controversy cards, giving all three to each learner. Have volunteers read each of the cards. Have the group choose which one they want to pursue in this activity.
5. Now talk through the four steps that were on the handout. Step #1 is covered by the controversy cards. Work with your learners to decide the best way of handling Steps #2 and #3. Tell them that we'll be coming back together to handle Step #4. Now it's time to research!
6. After their research is done, perhaps one to two weeks later, students will come back together when they have gathered information and will share what they have learned. Be creative in this sharing! There are many different ways your class could go about this. For instance, the class could set up a mock debate where half of the class argues for one position using the information they have gathered, and the other half argues the other side. You could also have students write essays supporting their position using the information they have gathered.
7. If learners liked this activity and it seemed to go well, ask them if they'd like to pick another controversy to research. They can use the other controversy cards, or they can come up with a different controversy to explore.

**Controversy Card #1**
**Should handguns be controlled by the government?**

**NO**. The Bill of Rights guarantees Americans the right to own guns. There are many violent people in the world, and we need to be able to protect ourselves. If handguns were outlawed, only outlaws will have guns. The government should not interfere with our ability to protect ourselves.

**YES**. A handgun is a machine designed to kill people, and we would be better off without them. People who live in homes where there are handguns are more likely to commit suicide or be murdered than other people. Guns kept in homes are more likely to kill a family member or friend than an intruder.

**Controversy Card #2**
**Should the U.S. use the death penalty?**

**NO**. Life is sacred. The death penalty is a cruel and barbaric punishment. Two wrongs don't make a right, and meeting violence with violence is not the answer. It would be horrible to execute an innocent person, and we all know that human beings make mistakes. If our society needs to remove a dangerous person, we should use life imprisonment.

**YES**. A person who commits a violent crime must pay for it. If criminals know they might be executed, they will think twice before killing someone. Why should taxpayers pay for life imprisonment for people who commit horrible crimes? Our legal system is fair enough to decide if people are guilty or innocent. If you kill, you should lose your life.

**Controversy Card #3**
**Should poor people get Welfare?**

**NO**. One of the things that makes America great is that people work hard to make money. No one has to be poor, and if people work hard enough, they can even get rich. Welfare programs encourage people to be lazy and weak. Unless people are unable to work because of illness or disability, they should support themselves and their families.

**YES**. We're the richest country in the world, and we have a responsibility to take care of people who are struggling to survive. Finding a job can be hard, and many jobs don't pay enough to take care of a family. Poor families need help to improve their situations and to give their children a chance to succeed. Our government can and should help.

# Activity #1: Comparing Living Standards Around the World

| *Country* | *Population, 1994* | *Number of people per square mile, 1995* | *Average earnings in U.S. dollars, 1994* | *Number of children under 5 dying per 1000 live births, 1990-95* | *Life expectancy, 1990-1995* | *Percent of population with access to safe water, 1988-1993* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **United States** | 260,600,000 | 45 | 25,860 | 9 | 76 | 100 |
| **Switzerland** | 7,100,000 | 262 | 37,180 | 6 | 78 | 100 |
| **Mexico** | 91,900,000 | 80 | 4,010 | 36 | 71 | 84 |
| **El Salvador** | 5,600,000 | 455 | 1,480 | 46 | 66 | 47 |
| **Peru** | 23,300,000 | 31 | 1,890 | 64 | 64 | 72 |
| **Ethiopia** | 53,400,000 | 76 | 130 | 119 | 47 | 25 |
| **Zimbabwe** | 11,000,000 | 47 | 490 | 67 | 54 | 84 |
| **China** | 1,208,800,000 | 206 | 530 | 44 | 68 | 69 |
| **Japan** | 124,800,000 | 536 | 34,630 | 4 | 79 | no data |
| **Australia** | 17,900,000 | 3 | 17,980 | 7 | 78 | no data |



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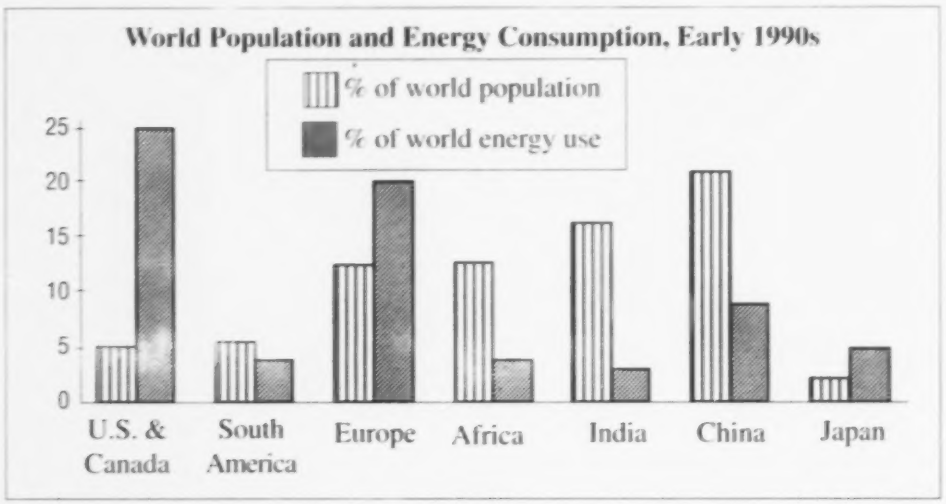
*Beyond Basic Skills*, Volume 2, Number 2, Spring 1998 page 5 The Department of Adult Education, The University of Georgia

# Activity #2: Who Uses What?: The Price of Industrialization

## Part One: Energy Consumption Around the World

People living in industrialized nations like the United States have a better quality of life in many ways than people living in less developed countries or continents. Part of the high quality of life is associated with the amount of industry we have in our country. But industry does not come without costs, and these costs are not always directly measured in dollars. Production of goods requires high energy use, and high energy consumption causes pollution and hazardous waste, which destroy the natural environment.

Compared to other countries and continents, the United States uses much more than its share of energy. Energy in the forms of coal, oil, and gasoline are finite resources, which means that they can be used up. Look at the following graph to compare the energy consumption of different countries and continents:




## Part Two: The Negative Consequences of High Energy Use

1. The U.S. is one of the top producers of hazardous waste, producing over 5 million tons a year. The U.S. also ships over 160,000 tons of this waste a year to other countries for storage. This, of course, pollutes other countries with our toxic waste. Every industrialized country except the United States now favors a ban on hazardous waste exports.

2. The U.S. is also one of the top users of toxic pesticides, using over 51,000 tons a year. These pesticides run off into and pollute water supplies, affecting the fish we eat and the water we drink.

3. The U.S. produces more than 10% of the world's greenhouse gases, which cause global warming.

4. The U.S. is the top producer of sulphur dioxide emissions (21 million tons), which cause acid rain and destroy lakes, rivers, forests, and buildings.

5. The U.S. is one of the top consumers of ozone-depleting substances, which damage the ozone layer and cause increases in skin cancers and other health hazards.

6. In 1990, 437 U.S. cities and counties failed to meet at least one of the EPA's air quality standards; 57% of Whites, 65% of African-Americans, and 80% of Latinos lived in these areas.

# Activity #3: Taking a Stand on Controversial Issues

## Part One: What is a Controversy?

Part of what makes a democracy strong is that the people decide what is right and wrong. However, some social problems are very complicated, and different people believe very different things. When a problem has two sides and people feel strongly about one side or the other, we call that problem a controversy or a controversial issue. Last year in Georgia, there was a heated controversy about our state flag. Some people argued that the flag is an important part of the state's history and we should keep it as it is. Other people argued that the flag is a symbol of southern society before slavery was abolished, and we need to change it.

People use many different ways to figure out where they stand on controversial issues. Some just go along with what their friends think. Some use their emotions. Some people just stay out of it and let other people decide. And some people read and do research to form their own opinions. Which type of person are you?

## Part Two: Learning about Controversies through Research

Here are some general steps you can follow to learn about controversies. These steps involve research, which really just means to go looking for information:

- **Step #1**: Make sure you understand the controversy—and how people on both sides feel about it.
- **Step #2**: Gather information about both sides. Try to find the best arguments that each side makes. Don't just write down the side you like best. Write down the information so that you don't forget it.
- **Step #3**: Study the information and then decide how you feel. Sometimes you'll feel the same way you did when you started. Sometimes you'll switch sides. Sometimes you'll find a new position that blends the best arguments of both sides.
- **Step #4**: Talk with other people about it. Listen to their views and express your views. You can learn a lot by talking with people you respect.

You can do research in many different places, but one popular place is the library. In Georgia, we have an excellent system of public libraries. One of the things that libraries are good for is helping people find the information they need to make decisions in our democratic system. When doing research on a controversy, you can ask the librarians in your local library to help you find information that will help you better understand the issue. They will have plenty of good ideas about where to look. Once you know where to look for information, you can find just about anything! Here are two very good sources of information:

- **The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature**. This is designed to help you find newspaper and magazine articles that talk about your issue.
- **The World Wide Web**. This is the huge computer network that has lots of information on almost any topic. The Web also lets just about anyone state their opinions for everyone to see. The librarian will show you how to find information on the Web. It is a little hard at first, but it gets easier once you get the hang of it, and you'll really like it.

### Discussion Questions for Activity #3

**Part One:**

1. How does it feel to talk with someone with different opinions than you?
2. Should you try to persuade other people to think like you do? Why or why not?
3. Is it even possible to persuade other people? How could you?
4. How do you go about deciding where you stand on issues?
5. Have you ever known anyone who just went along with what their friends thought? Used their emotions? Stayed out of it? Read and did research?

**Part Two:**

1. What are good sources of information?
2. Where would you go in our town to find information?
3. What types of information do you think would be the most helpful? (from newspapers, magazines, etc.) Why?

**Missing an Issue?** Write to us and we'll send you back issues. You can also find all back issues of *Beyond Basic Skills* on the web at http://www.coe.uga.edu/adulted/staffdev/ In order to download the newsletters, you first have to get Adobe Acrobat. It's easy to use and it's available for free. Just click on the icon on our webpage. You can also write to us for a free copy of the tip sheet "Seven Simple Strategies for Group Instruction."

### For Further Information

***Check out these Web sites for some great information and classroom ideas for teaching about the world and critical social analysis:***

Population Reference Bureau — http://www.prb.org/

The World Village — http://www.worldvillage.org/index2.html

***For more information about the National Institute for Literacy and Equipped for the Future, look here:***

http://novel.nifl.gov/

Public radio station WUGA in Athens recently completed a four part radio series called "The Individual in a Global Society." Art LaChance, director of the Gilmer County Adult Learning Center, and two of his students, Pat Hembree and Betty Pruitt, are featured in Program Two. You can download free transcripts and get more information by visiting the "What's New" section on the American Society of International Law's website at http://www.asil.org/ And listen for the programs to air on your local public radio station!

***The facts and figures used in the activities came from these great books. They would be great resources for your classroom:***


Henwood, D. (1994.) *The state of the U.S.A. atlas.* New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Rand McNally & Company. (1996). *Rand McNally World Facts & Maps, 1996 edition.*

Seager, J. (1995). *The new state of the earth atlas.* New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Wright, J. W., ed. (1996). *The universal almanac, 1997.* Kansas City: Andrews & McMeel.



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